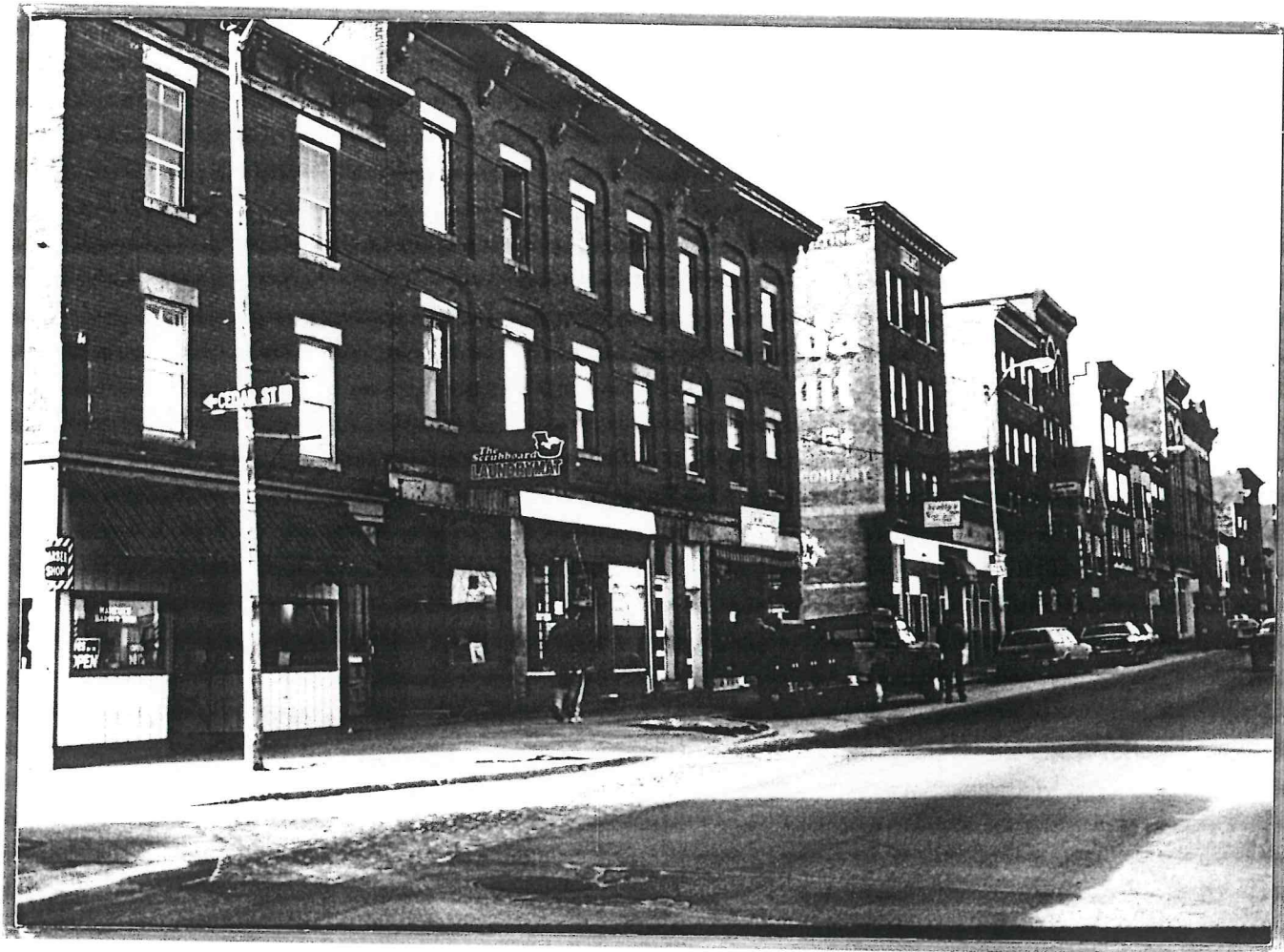


Downtown Action Plan



City of Lewiston

CITY OF LEWISTON

DOWNTOWN ACTION PLAN

Prepared

by the

DOWNTOWN STUDY COMMITTEE

Adopted April, 1995

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FOREWARD

The goals and strategies detailed in this Plan described the proposed actions and commitment of funding and personnel resources to be applied to Lewiston's Downtown Redevelopment District over the next 5 to 10 years.

This Plan was adopted to be the specific downtown redevelopment component of the City of Lewiston's Comprehensive Plan as well as the Downtown Component of the City's CDBG Consolidated Plan.

CITY OF LEWISTON
DOWNTOWN ACTION PLAN

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Overview

Revitalizing Lewiston's Downtown is a significant priority to the City. Unlike many communities that have discarded their downtown districts, we view the Downtown as an extremely important asset to the Community. The Downtown historically served as the retail and cultural center of the Community and region. In their heyday, the mills in the downtown area employed thousands of people. Taking into account the drastic reduction in those employees in the Downtown and that the majority of the historic retailers have relocated to malls, it is not realistic to expect to recreate the same type of downtown we had in the past. However, with perseverance and a little luck, we have an opportunity to create a new type of downtown; one with a diverse, yet compatible mix of light manufacturing, professional office, specialty retailers, service and financial businesses, entertainment and cultural facilities and residential uses.

Successful downtown revitalization occurs when there is a collaborative approach between the public and private sectors. The City is committed to investing in the Downtown through various public improvements and low-interest loan and grant programs which assist property owners and tenants improving their properties in locating in the Downtown. In addition, Downtown property owners must likewise make a long-term commitment to the improvement and maintenance of their properties and surrounding areas.

B. Downtown Redevelopment District

The Downtown Redevelopment District is an area of economic and residential diversity. The Downtown is a reflection of Lewiston's history and development. It is generally bordered by the Androscoggin River, Bates Street, Gully Brook, and the Maine Central Rail Line (See Figure 1).

Downtown residential areas provided housing for the thousands of workers employed by the numerous textile and shoe mills that once drove the City's economy. Today, these areas are still vital residential neighborhoods.

The Androscoggin River, with its Great Falls that provided the water power that drove the mills, is once again a main focus in the revitalization strategy of Downtown Lewiston. The railroad bridge project over the same tracks that brought the French Canadian immigrant population to the City is again bringing life to the riverfront, as it provides the hub of Lewiston-Auburn's pedestrian, bikeway, and greenway systems.

The mills, which no longer employ the large numbers, have become an integral part of the redevelopment efforts. With approximately 6 million square feet of mill space still existing in the Downtown, the adaptive reuse of these historical buildings is critical to the effective revitalization of the Downtown. The largest of the mills, the Bates Mill, contains over 1.2 million square feet and has become a linchpin in the drive to make Downtown Lewiston once again a center of commerce in Central Maine.

These efforts, along with new and innovative concepts for mixed uses along the Lisbon/Canal Street Corridors, will enable the City of Lewiston to embrace the 21st century as a leader in downtown redevelopment.

C. Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this document is to specify a "Plan of Action" to enhance the viability and redevelopment of Lewiston's Downtown. The objectives of the Action Plan include the following:

1. To identify current concerns and issues affecting the growth and development of the Downtown;

2. To identify and enhance the positive aspects of the Downtown;
3. To analyze possible alternatives for resolving issues that affect the Downtown; and
4. To put forth a plan of action for the growth and betterment of the Downtown.

D. Downtown Study Committee

In August, 1994, the City Council established the Downtown Study Committee to analyze the major issues affecting the Downtown and develop a specific plan of action to address these issues. The Committee was comprised of representatives of Downtown business and property owners, employees of Downtown businesses, real estate/development professionals, members of the City Council and appointed City officials.

II. ISSUES AFFECTING THE DOWNTOWN

A. General Economic Overview

Since the Community's inception, and until the mid 1970's, the Downtown provided the majority of jobs and served as the primary economic base of the City and region as a whole.

Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, Lewiston developed as a manufacturing center, particularly textiles, due to its location on the shores of the Androscoggin River. The Mills that sprang up along the river and canal system rivalled those of the Massachusetts towns of Lowell, Lawrence and Waltham. During the late 1800's and early 1900's, at least ten major mills were in operation, which consisted of nearly 10 million square feet of industrial uses. During this period, 70% of the City's work force was associated with these mills and Lewiston was in fact the center of the Industrial Revolution in Maine.

Through the 1950's, the mill buildings continued to employ a large segment of the City's population. According to historical records, in 1950 some 10,000 people were employed in the mills producing textiles and shoes. During this time period, Bates Manufacturing Company was the largest employer in the State, employing over 6,500 people in five mills, three in Lewiston. As was customary in northeast mill towns, residential and commercial enterprises developed adjacent to the mills.

As a result of competition from overseas, southern states, and technological advancements, employment in the historical industries, that drove the economy of the community, declined significantly. As late as 1984, the textile and shoe industries accounted for nearly 40% of the employment within the City. Today, these industries, while holding their own and in some cases actually realizing a resurgence, account for only 8% of the City's work force. This has demanded significant economic diversification within the community by means of a varied spectrum of new and expanding businesses.

As described above, approximately 6 million square feet of space remains in eight mills. While these mill buildings no longer provide the magnitude of employment they once did, they are currently being adapted and utilized for a variety of enterprises ranging from traditional shoe and textile businesses to other niche manufacturers, retail uses, professional offices, educational

and cultural centers and warehouse uses. In recent years, these mills have served as outstanding incubator spaces for a large number of start-up and small emerging companies.

The Downtown, which was once the retail center for the region has lost the vast majority of the major retailing and related businesses to the malls and other areas of the Community. What remains are specialty niche retailers, restaurants and other varied uses. In addition, the Downtown is making a transition to a center for professional businesses, banks, and service-oriented offices. In recent years, a large number of businesses such as legal firms, accountants, and back-office telecommunication related businesses have located in the Downtown, typically occupying upper floor spaces.

B. Issues and Needs

Lewiston has achieved a significant transition to a much more diversified economy and efforts to revitalize the Downtown have realized some tangible results. As a result of substantial efforts on the part of both the public and private sectors, Lewiston has managed to pull itself out of a downward economic spiral. We are now experiencing an upward swing in the economy, providing livable-income job opportunities and translating that to the lowest jobless rate in many years. Further, a number of city-wide economic stimulus programs have made Lewiston a focus of success throughout the State.

Lest we get euphoric, the job is far from complete. We as a City have not and must not stand still. We still have immense needs in the Downtown that must be addressed through elimination of blighting influences, provision of better educational and employment opportunities, redevelopment of important historic buildings, promotion of new businesses and generally improving the image of the Downtown.

The Lower Lisbon/Canal Street Corridor, while ever-changing over the past 20 years retains a negative stigma that has affected Lewiston's general image. Lower Lisbon Street still remains the most travelled gateway to the City of Lewiston with access off Turnpike Exit 13 and Route 196 from the east. Vacant buildings in the area are of great concern aesthetically, as well as functionally. Perceived parking problems existing throughout the Downtown also manifest themselves along the Lisbon/Canal Street Corridor.

Truck traffic is a major concern in the Downtown, as it often impacts efficient vehicular circulation and access. Diverting truck traffic headed for Auburn and other parts of the City is a major issue that must be addressed if the City is to realize a more user friendly gateway and to ensure that the Downtown becomes a final destination for the consumer and a desired location for businesses.

While professional offices are occupying a large amount of upper floor space in the Downtown (a growing trend), there still remains a substantial volume of vacant and underutilized street level space in some areas of the Downtown. These vacant and underutilized store fronts are detrimental to the image of the Downtown as an active and vital place, which is inhibiting new private investment in these areas.

Strategies to address these issues must be focused in the areas of business attraction and improving the image of the Downtown. Redevelopment of key historic buildings, including the Bates Mill and Pilsbury Block is a priority. Both upper and lower floors in buildings must be marketed to enhance the image of Lewiston's Downtown. Creation of effective parking and better management, maintenance and marketing of existing parking facilities is a must. In addition, future planning for the Lower Lisbon, Canal and Lincoln Street corridors, riverfront areas and sidewalk/pedestrian oriented spaces also must be part of piecing together the downtown revitalization puzzle.

As described above, many of the changes to the economy of the Downtown and Lewiston are structural. The majority of people which have lost their jobs in the mills will not be able to find work in the newer businesses or will remain underemployed unless a substantial amount of public and private investment is focused for new industry attraction, small business development and job training programs.

The City has been cognizant of these needs for many years and has been very aggressive in attempting to address them. However, because of the large scope of the Downtown's needs and the general lack of resources available to address all these needs, progress has been slow. The most effective method of addressing these issues is to commence a focused redevelopment program involving a number of aggressive actions and strategies.

III. ON-GOING REVITALIZATION EFFORTS

A. Redevelopment Program

The Lewiston Downtown Redevelopment Program is an ongoing dynamic process that implements the primary objectives described above, while attempting to meet the changing problems and needs of the Downtown. To date, the Downtown Development Program involves the following major ongoing projects: riverfront improvements, mill building adaptive reuse, neighborhood improvements, L/A Public Theater redevelopment, enhancement to Lisbon, Lincoln and Canal Street corridors, building rehabilitation, and historic preservation of significant historic resources. Following is a summary of the City's current efforts related to these projects.

1) Riverfront Improvements

Improvement of the riverfront areas will promote the Androscoggin River as a valued asset to the Community. These improvements will stimulate public interest and greater use of the riverfront areas. Accordingly, our efforts related to the improvement of the riverfront areas currently include:

1. reconstruction of the railroad bridge as a bike and pedestrian facility;
2. development of a new six acre park adjacent to bridge;
3. development of interconnecting bike and pedestrian trail along riverfront;
4. improvement of existing riverfront parks; and
5. enhancement of the canal system.

2) Mill Building Reuse

The City of Lewiston has more square footage (over six million square feet) of former textile mills than any other community in northern New England. These buildings which were constructed beginning in the mid 1800's served as the birthplace of the industrial revolution in Maine, and the foundation of the city's establishment and growth. Accordingly, it is the City's goal to maximize these great assets by reusing these significant structures to their maximum potential.

The majority of these mills are occupied with a variety of uses including manufacturing, professional offices, retail uses, educational and cultural facilities, and warehousing, while only a small percentage of the structures are totally vacant.

A major effort currently being undertaken by the City is the redevelopment and reuse of the Bates Mill Complex with the assistance of a \$1.9 million grant from the Economic Development Administration (EDA) to fund the majority of necessary infrastructure and improvements. We expect that the realization of the Bates Mill Redevelopment project will have a profound positive economic impact on the downtown. These efforts will stimulate the long-term development of the Complex as a multi-use enterprise with a focus on business incubators, retail outlets, education and cultural activities and other compatible uses. It is projected that the ultimate build-out of the Complex could generate upwards of 2,500 new jobs. The City's Redevelopment efforts in the Bates Mill are being undertaken with a focus on attracting a buyer for the entire complex or absent that, a joint venture with the City to encourage an expeditious build out schedule.

As one can realize, the economic stimulus that this project, both short and long term, can have on downtown Lewiston is significant. Existing downtown businesses, and the other mill buildings, will greatly benefit from the "spillover" effect of the successful redevelopment of the Bates Mill Complex.

3) **Neighborhood Improvements**

Effective revitalization of the downtown must involve the improvement of the residential neighborhoods in and around the Downtown area. To that end, the City has and is aggressively implementing a number of programs that promote the improvement and stabilization of these neighborhoods. These programs include low interest loans for the rehabilitation of residential properties, with a goal to reduce total available dwelling units, and provision of loans for the acquisition of occupant owned properties.

The City also employs an aggressive code enforcement and acquisition program for unsafe and vacant buildings. As buildings are taken down, the spaces are proposed for use as parking, green space, and playground areas for neighborhood children.

4) **Ritz Theatre Area Improvements Project**

The Ritz Theatre Area Improvements Project is designed to help revitalize the neighborhood surrounding the new home of the Public Theatre, a key component to enhancing **one of our gateways to the Downtown.** The Theatre's bold decision in early 1992 to locate their business in the abandoned Ritz Theatre building has focused attention on one of Lewiston's most blighted areas and has begun that area's transformation into a cultural district. A cultural plan is currently being developed by the City that will provide further guidance for the proposed cultural district.

Through a remarkable spirit of public and private cooperation, along with much volunteer effort, the Public Theatre opened their beautifully refurbished facility in October of 1992 to rave reviews from both the public and arts community. The City helped make the opening possible through a CDBG grant, a business loan and by providing some limited green space and signage improvements near the Theater. In addition, the City worked with the Resolution Trust Corporation to acquire and demolish three (3) tenement buildings on both sides of the Theatre as well as across Maple Street in order to visually improve the area and provide additional parking and green space.

The City is in the process of further renovation of that area by performing sidewalk and curbing improvements, parking lot enhancements, storm drainage work, street overlays, street trees, landscaping and pedestrian amenities such as street lights and park benches. The sidewalk pavement, lighting and benches will be of similar design as those recently installed in the historic area along Canal Street and around the City Building. Furthermore, the City has proposed to do facade enhancements of the Theatre to improve its appearance and to help complete the external renovation of the Theatre building.

5) **Building Rehabilitation and Reuse**

Over the past few years, the City has and continues to work closely with local property owners in the rehabilitation and reuse of a number of important downtown properties. The net effect of these efforts was the creation of thousands of jobs in the Downtown and the preservation of important historic buildings. These recent and on-going efforts include the

following major efforts:

1. assisting L.L. Bean in the rehabilitation of the Peck Building and construction of parking facilities;
2. assisting Financial Institution Service Corporation (FISC) with the purchase and rehabilitation of the building located at 152 Lisbon Street;
3. assisting with the rehabilitation of the Middle & Main Building;
4. assisting with the rehabilitation of the historic Atkinson Block;
5. assisting with the rehabilitation of the historic Pilsbury Building and the potential library expansion project; and
6. rehabilitation and reuse of the historic Bates Mill.

6) **Lisbon, Lincoln and Canal Street Corridor Enhancement**

Along with Main Street, Lisbon, Lincoln and Canal Streets are the major thoroughfares through the Downtown. Therefore, the improvement and enhancement of these ways is critical to the revitalization of adjacent properties. Certainly, the past efforts to improve Main Street played a key role in the enhancement of the businesses located on it. Likewise, upper Lisbon Street and Canal Street enhancement activities over the past years also have been beneficial to the image of the Downtown and will provide a stimulus for increased business activity along these corridors. Further efforts along lower Lisbon, Canal and Lincoln Streets will have similar positive effects.

In addition to the above, the City seeks to have on-going communication with downtown property owners and other interested parties to identify opportunities to implement other improvements, such as parking, that will stimulate the betterment of properties and facilitate business expansion and relocation to the Downtown.

7) **Historic Preservation**

The City of Lewiston has an outstanding asset in its historic and cultural resources. These resources include many of the mill buildings, the canal system and over 75 other historic buildings which are currently on the local Historic Register. Accordingly, effective redevelopment of the Downtown must incorporate the preservation and reuse of significant historic structures. A Preservation Plan and a cultural planning process for the Downtown Development District are currently underway in the City.

Because of Lewiston's formation as the birthplace of the industrial revolution in Maine and its rich Franco-American heritage, the redevelopment of the Downtown should focus on accentuating these historical and cultural assets as a draw to the Downtown. In addition to the social and cultural benefits of preserving significant historic structures, property owners also can realize significant tax credits in rehabilitating their buildings.

IV. REDEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES

A. Downtown Revitalization Goals

As described above, Lewiston's Downtown Revitalization Program is an ongoing dynamic process that involves a collaborative approach with a great deal of perseverance and focus of resources. Based upon the issues and opportunities described in Section II, the five broad goals of the Downtown Revitalization Program are:

1. Stimulate and maintain vital business investment in the Downtown.
2. Improve the Downtown gateways and corridors.
3. Improve vehicular parking and access in the Downtown.
4. Promote preservation of important historic buildings that define the character of the Downtown.
5. Enhance the aesthetic quality of the Downtown.
6. Facilitate and improve pedestrian movement and access in the downtown.

B. Downtown Strategies

Following, are specific short and long-term program strategies, that when collectively implemented, will achieve the broad goals described above and address the needs of the Downtown. These strategies are categorized as follows: parking; building revitalization and improvements; traffic and infrastructure improvements; physical improvements and maintenance; business investment; and marketing and promotion.

1. Parking

Goal: Improve Parking Facilities in and around the Lisbon and Canal Street Corridors from Willow to Main Street.

Short-term Strategies:

- A. Provide additional short-term parking along Ash Street in the area of the Post Office.
- B. Restripe the municipal parking lot to provide for an additional 100-150 parking spaces.

- C. Demolish Buildings 7 and 8 at the Bates Mill and provide a parking area to enhance the development opportunities within the Mill and to ease the parking situation along the canal frontage area of the mill. This action would provide ± 250 parking spaces.
- D. Provide off-street parking on lower and upper Lisbon Street through infill parking and provide green space where empty lots now exist. Infill parking will be provided at empty lots on Lisbon Street in areas determined to need additional parking.
- E. Expand and improve the present parking validation program with the downtown merchants to draw more consumer traffic to downtown Lewiston.
- F. Review standard hours for the existing parking garage accessway to be open to the public.
- G. Add lighting and other aesthetic features to the existing parking garage.
- H. Initiate a parking awareness campaign regarding existing and planned parking facilities in the Downtown.

Long-Term Strategies:

- A. Provide additional covered accessways to Lisbon Street from the existing parking garage.
- B. Construct a new parking garage on upper Lisbon Street with access directly to and from Lisbon and Canal Streets.
- C. Evaluate mechanisms to provide free parking in the Downtown and ways to make up revenue shortfalls from such a program.
- D. Initiate a needs assessment for a Lower Lisbon Street parking facility.
- E. Evaluate feasibility of expanding existing parking garage.

2. Building Revitalization and Improvements

Goal: Enhance the aesthetic and structural features of the buildings in the Downtown.

Strategies:

- A. Explore innovative and creative funding mechanisms to assist Downtown property owners in improving these properties, e.g. Federal and State grant and loan programs and Tax Increment Financing (TIF) districts.

- B. Utilize the Section 108 Loan Guarantee Program in conjunction with other economic revitalization grants to assist in building renovation.
- C. Expand the City's existing commercial rehabilitation program to provide more products for low interest loans and grants for building renovations.
- D. Establish a facade improvement grant/rebate program to building owners who improve the facade of their building.
- E. Utilize recommendation from the Preservation Plan to prioritize buildings for preservation efforts.

3. Traffic and Infrastructure Improvements

Goal: Improve traffic circulation and infrastructure inadequacies that are detrimental to business location.

Strategies:

- A. The City, in cooperation with Lewiston Auburn Comprehensive Transportation Study (LACTS) and Maine Department of Transportation (MDOT), should analyze the traffic patterns in the Downtown area and then take the necessary steps to alleviate the traffic flow problems.
- B. Improve street and road surfaces; granite curbing; sidewalk upgrading and subsurface infrastructure where needed. Crosswalks (preferably of a different type and texture of material) are essential for improving the pedestrian environment of the area.
- C. Pave off-street access roads, alleys, and millyard interior spaces which are currently unpaved.
- D. Replace or rehabilitate problematic cross canal bridges as appropriate, which are compatible with the scale and character of the downtown.
- E. Place underground utilities in areas or adjacent/surrounding key buildings, or where low wires threaten vehicular access and to improve aesthetics.

- F. Develop new access points for mills and other buildings which currently have a "dead end" access, and require turning movements within the complexes. Turning radii for access points of several mills (Hill, Androscoggin, Bates) are inadequate for entry of heavy trucks/tractor trailers. Also, this condition is causing damage to the buildings. New delivery and pick-up points should be investigated, which do not require trucks to enter the interior of the complexes.
- G. Integrate bicycle and pedestrian system into and through downtown.

4. **Physical Improvements and Maintenance**

Goal: Improve the Downtown image and provide for a more user friendly Downtown.

Strategies:

- A. Utilize CDBG and other grant funds to aggressively assemble properties and conduct major revitalization efforts along the lower Lisbon and Canal Street areas, using historic preservation, open space and parking needs to direct efforts.
- B. Establish a directional signage program for businesses and traffic flow parking patterns.
- C. Strategically place trash receptacles along Lisbon Street.
- D. Establish reader boards for pedestrian traffic to provide locators and to encourage use of businesses in the Downtown.
- E. Initiate a winter parking ban ordinance for more expeditious and economic snow removal.
- F. Coordinate snow removal on Lisbon and Canal Street sidewalks to provide a consistency for pedestrian traffic.
- G. Continue to improve residential neighborhoods by utilizing existing programs including Lewiston L.O.A.N.S., CDBG Residential Rehab and Housing Opportunity Zone (HOZ) funds.
- H. Strategically reuse areas for pedestrian gathering and access ways throughout the Downtown.

5. Business Investment

Goal: Expand opportunities and incentives for the location and/or expansion of small businesses in the Downtown.

Strategies:

- A. Establish a small business incubator space in the Bates Mill or other appropriate buildings, utilizing CDBG Section 108, or other applicable programs.
- B. Establish a One Stop Capital Shop within the business incubator.
- C. Expand the City's current economic stimulus and micro-loan programs through CDBG, Section 108 programs and other applicable resources.
- D. Seek waiver of Farmer's Home Administration (FMHA) Intermediary Relending Program guidelines to offer additional loan programs and funds to small businesses.
- E. Establish a program where local lenders will provide below market rate loans to small businesses through the One Stop Capital Shop Program.

Goal: Identify and attract larger companies to the Downtown Area.

Strategies:

- A. Establish a manufacturing enterprise partnership program to identify potential new businesses that are related to existing businesses.
- B. Conduct a major marketing program which targets telecommunication intensive industries capitalizing on superior telecommunications infrastructure, available space and superb workforce.
- C. Expand the City's ESLP program to continue to provide subordinated debt to downtown businesses, with waiver of IRP guidelines.

Goal: Attract new investors to purchase, redevelop and utilize the buildings within the Downtown.

Strategies:

- A. Make available tax incentives and grant and loans programs to entice new investors and/or businesses. These may include investment tax credits, tax exempt bonds, historic preservation tax credits and CDBG, Section 108 and other applicable programs.

- B. Investigate the purchase of redevelopable buildings in the Downtown and negotiate the sale of them to new investors at a write-down using bond proceeds, CDBG, Section 108, or other applicable programs.
- C. Establish Lewiston Community Capital Venture Fund to encourage tax credits for a new business investment in the Target Area.
- D. Provide necessary public improvements related to successful projects utilizing bond proceeds, CDBG and EDA programs.

6. Marketing and Promotion

Goal: Expand and Improve the marketing and promotion of the Downtown.

Strategies:

- A. Work with the Downtown Development and Management Corporation, Androscoggin Valley Chamber of Commerce or other entities to develop an effective marketing and promotion plan for the Downtown.
- B. Coordinate and initiate a real estate inventory process for downtown buildings.
- C. Utilize non-general fund resources to hire additional personnel to assist in the management and promotion of the Downtown.

